

<b>Institution: Newcastle University</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: Politics and International Studies</b>
<b>Title of case study: Informing Education Policy in Northern Ireland: The Lasting Effects of the First Deliberative Opinion Poll in a Divided Society</b>
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>

This innovative research has had an enduring influence on shared education policy debates in Northern Ireland. It directly affected the understanding and attitudes of the most important education policy actors, including the Department for Education Northern Ireland and the Good Relations Forum. It has been significant in two ways. First, it has been widely acknowledged as providing especially robust and reliable evidence of public support for greater sharing in education (e.g. through shared campuses for Protestant and Catholic schools). Secondly, it has been recognised as a model of best practice for consulting the two main communities, unionist and nationalist, about reforms to education provision.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b>
---------------------------------

This case study is based on research conducted by O'Flynn between 2004 (when he was appointed at Newcastle University) and 2012. In his 2006 monograph, *Deliberative Democracy and Divided Societies* [1], O'Flynn makes the case for introducing institutions that promote deliberative democracy in religiously and ethnically divided societies. He argues that talking about important political issues under controlled conditions that establish fair rules for discussion can promote mutual trust, reconciliation and the recognition of shared goals. More specifically, he was the first to explicitly advocate the use of "deliberative opinion polls" in divided societies [1, pp.86-88]. Conventional opinion polls are often criticised for eliciting uninformed and unreflective responses, which may help to reinforce existing social and political divisions. In contrast, the participants in a deliberative poll are provided with the opportunity to learn about a given policy issue through briefing materials, facilitated small group discussions and plenary sessions with expert stakeholders, before they are polled. Accordingly, deliberative polls seek to reveal what the public would think if its members had the same opportunities for informed and reflective discussion as the representative sample who participate in the poll.

In 2006-7, O'Flynn led a research team that conducted the first deliberative poll in a divided society to test empirically the usefulness of the methodology. The poll was on the reform of the education system in general and shared education in particular (i.e. Catholic and Protestant children being taught together or Catholic and Protestant schools sharing facilities or teachers to provide an enhanced curriculum). It was conducted in Omagh, Northern Ireland. Omagh was chosen because it is in important respects a microcosm of Northern Ireland: demographically, it is highly representative, and educationally, it contains all of the main school-types [2, p.4]. O'Flynn's collaborators included the creators of the deliberative poll methodology (Fishkin, *Stanford* and Luskin, *Texas*) and experts on education policy in Northern Ireland (Gallagher and Russell, *Queen's Belfast*). The research was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, a US-based charitable foundation which aims to improve the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

The project began with 565 parents of school age children completing an education policy questionnaire. They were then invited to participate in a day devoted to debating possible changes to the education system involving greater provision for sharing. In consultation with key stakeholders, including the Department for Education Northern Ireland (DENI), the project team developed balanced briefing materials, which were distributed in advance to the 250 parents who indicated they were willing to participate. On the day, 127 parents participated in small group discussions and plenary sessions with an expert panel before completing the same questionnaire a second time. The results of the second (deliberative) poll were statistically compared with the results of the first (conventional) poll.

## Impact case study (REF3b)

The research demonstrated that deliberative polls could be successfully conducted in divided societies, with participants from different religious groups being able to have respectful and constructive discussions, which promoted mutual understanding. The deliberation day also increased participants' factual knowledge about Northern Ireland's education system [2, p.32]. The deliberative poll showed: (1) majority support for various forms of sharing in education; (2) support for some forms of sharing (e.g. partnering with neighbouring schools of another religious denomination) was significantly higher after deliberation [2, p.22]; (3) significantly more participants from both communities perceived members of the other community to be 'open to reason' and 'trustworthy' after deliberation [2, pp.34-7].

The initial results of the project were first published in 2007 [2] with further analyses conducted as part of an EU-funded project on shared education in 2008 [3] and a fuller consideration of the effects of deliberation in a 2013 *Political Studies* article [4]. The results of the project were also disseminated to non-academic audiences through a BBC Northern Ireland *Hearts and Minds* documentary (2007), national and international media coverage (2007-9) and presentations to DENI, Belfast City Council and other organisations (2007).

### 3. References to the research

- [1] O'Flynn, I. (2006) *Deliberative Democracy and Divided Societies*. Edinburgh and New York: Edinburgh University Press and Palgrave. Copy available on request. [Submitted as an output for RAE2008]
- [2] Fishkin J., Gallagher, T., Luskin R., McGrady, J., O'Flynn I. and Russell D. (2007) *A Deliberative Poll on Education: What Provision do Informed Parents in Northern Ireland Want?* Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle University. Copy available on request or at: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/nireland/2007/omagh-report.pdf>.
- [3] O'Sullivan P., O'Flynn I., Russell D. (2008) *Education and A Shared Future: Options for Sharing and Collaboration in Northern Ireland Schools*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast. Copy available on request or at: <http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.com/documents/education-and-a-shared-future.pdf>.
- [4] Luskin R., O'Flynn I., Fishkin J., Russell D. (2013) 'Deliberating across Deep Divides', *Political Studies*, forthcoming. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.01005.x> [REF2 output: 185161]

#### Supporting Grant:

Atlantic Philanthropies (BH063730, £147,420, 2006-7) funded the Deliberative Poll – "A Deliberative Poll on Education in Northern Ireland". O'Flynn was Principal Investigator with 100% funding to Newcastle University. Atlantic Philanthropies is a US-based charitable foundation which aims to improve the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged people and funds research that might contribute to those aims.

### 4. Details of the impact

The findings and deliberative poll methodology had a direct and enduring effect on the understanding and attitudes of key stakeholders in education policy in Northern Ireland. It has provided significant benefits in two areas. First, its findings have consistently been used by policy actors to demonstrate informed public support for more sharing in education. Second, it has been widely recognised as the leading example of best practice in public consultation on education policy in Northern Ireland.

#### Demonstrating Support for Shared Education

The key research findings have made a distinct contribution to how education policy actors understand public attitudes to sharing in education and have been used to support arguments for

## Impact case study (REF3b)

shared education policies because they are widely accepted as providing robust and reliable evidence of informed parental support. Most recently, the Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education (MAG), set up by the Education Minister to advise on the future of shared education in Northern Ireland, cited the results of the poll in its March 2013 report, *Advancing Shared Education* [IMP1, pp.84 and 92], as evidence that a majority of parents support various forms of sharing in education. It is the only academic source used in the report to provide evidence about parents' views. The research was also quoted by two statutory bodies, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (NICRC) [IMP2, pp. 6, 11] and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) [IMP3, p. 9], in their submissions to the MAG's consultation process. The MAG's reference to the poll's results – six years after it took place – and the use of the research by other stakeholders in the intervening period provides strong evidence of its enduring impact.

The deliberative poll was cited in the 2010 "Challenge Paper", *Ensuring the Good Relations Work in Our Schools Counts* [IMP4], published by the Good Relations Forum, a commission established under the auspices of NICRC and ECNI. The paper identifies shared education as a significant strategic area for Government reform arguing that it is a crucial vehicle for social integration. It uses the results of the poll to support the claim that "people want more sharing with 71% [in the Omagh poll] specifically stating that they would support integrated education" [IMP4, p.29]. The research has been used by other education stakeholders, nationally and locally. For example, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) developed its own response to the education policy implications of the research and discussed it at its executive committee meeting in November 2008 [IMP5] while Drumragh Integrated College (an integrated school in Omagh) cited the deliberative poll as evidence of a "groundswell of support for integrated education in Omagh" in its 2012 development proposal [IMP6, p.3].

This reflects a broader awareness of the research findings among key education policy actors. The Director of the Equality and All-Ireland Directorate in DENI has said that the research is "something which I *don't* think anybody working in this area *would* be unaware of or certainly *shouldn't* be unaware of" [IMP7]. In Omagh, the poll was an important catalyst for the development of a shared site, at the old Lisanelly army barracks, for six post-primary schools of different denominations, which received DENI support in 2008 and planning permission in 2013. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has said that the deliberative poll "created a context in which Lisanelly could move forward, I'm quite sure about that" [IMP8]. Similarly, the Project Director for the Lisanelly development said "it brought about a change in peoples' attitude and also it was useful in that it was quite clear that once people understood what it was about, they were actually very positive about the idea of shared education" [IMP9].

### Influencing the Approach to Public Consultation on Education Policy

The methodological example set by the Omagh deliberative poll continues to influence the attitudes of key education stakeholders to effective consultation processes. The Good Relations Forum paper [IMP4, pp.15 and 40] recommends deliberative polling as an appropriate consultation method. The Senior Development Officer at the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) described the deliberative poll as the "Rolls Royce" of consultation methods: "that was the way to do it. If you had the money that would be the way to do it [now]" [IMP10]. The Chief Executive Officer of CCMS recalled "... it was a very valuable process. It proved the value, if nothing else, of giving people information and asking them to challenge preconceived notions" and his Deputy said "it did influence the type of methodology that we used in respect of the general approach to consultations of creating an informed context against which people, parents, stakeholders would be asked to respond" [IMP8].

The research has also influenced attitudes to consultation processes within the Department of Education. A DENI senior civil servant said the draft DENI legislation on area based education planning, which emphasises the "involvement of relevant interests" in the planning process, was influenced by the experience of being involved in the Omagh deliberative poll: "what it certainly I think has done is influenced our thinking about, if not our practice, about how we consult and engage on these sorts of complex issues and I think the most powerful thing out of the poll is the recognition that actually the tried and tested unthinking methods of consultation on issues as

## Impact case study (REF3b)

complex as education are of limited use. The poll I think proves that. The differences between T1 and T2 measurements show that there's a huge value, in fact a necessity, in investing the time and effort and providing people with information about the issues that you're expecting them to give a view on" [IMP7].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [IMP1] Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education (2013) *Advancing Shared Education*. Belfast: DENI. Copy available on request or at: <http://www.gub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/MinisterialAdvisoryGroup/Filestore/Filetoupload,382123,en.pdf>.
- [IMP2] Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (2012) *Submission to Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education*. Copy available on request.
- [IMP3] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2013) *Submission to Ministerial Advisory Group on Advancing Shared Education*. Copy available on request.
- [IMP4] Good Relations Forum (2010) *Ensuring the Good Relations Work in our School Counts*. Belfast: NICRC/NIEC. ISBN: 978-1-906414-24-5. Copy available on request or at: <http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/crc-good-relations-forum-booklet-final-21-april-2010-pdf.pdf>.
- [IMP5] Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (2008) *A Summary of Key Points from: Education and a Shared Future – Options for Sharing and Collaboration in Northern Ireland Schools*. Copy available on request or at: <http://www.onlineccms.com/current-issues/30/>.
- [IMP6] Drumragh Integrated College (2012) *Drumragh Integrated College – Development Proposal No. 226, 2012*. Copy available on request.
- [IMP7] Interview with Director of Equality and All-Ireland Directorate, Department of Education Northern Ireland (17 September 2012). Transcript and audio recording available on request. (Interviewee independent from project team)
- [IMP8] Interview with Chief Executive Officer and Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (18 September 2012). Transcript and audio recording available on request. (Interviewee independent from project team)
- [IMP9] Interview with Project Director, Lisanelly Shared Campus Development (21 September 2012). Transcript and audio recording available on request. (Interviewee independent from project team)
- [IMP10] Interview with Senior Development Officer, Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (19 September 2012). Transcript and audio recording available on request. (Interviewee independent from project team)